

## Barbara Lee

1946–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1998–



Image courtesy of the Member

**A LONGTIME STATE LEGISLATOR AND AIDE TO** Congressman Ron Dellums, Barbara Lee eventually succeeded her political mentor in the House, carrying on Oakland's and the East Bay area's tradition of progressive politics. As a member of the Financial Services and International Relations committees, Congresswoman Lee has promoted legislative programs to create better economic opportunities for working Americans and people of color, to stem the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, and to advocate for a foreign policy that balances the priorities of peace and security.

Barbara Lee was born in El Paso, Texas, on July 16, 1946.<sup>1</sup> In 1960, her family moved to the Los Angeles area, and Lee graduated from San Fernando High School in 1964. Lee married as a teenager, gave birth to two sons, Tony and Craig, and then divorced.<sup>2</sup> But she was determined, even as a single mother, to get a university education. Lee recalled that her family's support and "a safety net that existed in California that gave me access to higher education" changed her life.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, as the Black Student Union president at Mills College in Oakland, Lee arranged for Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm to speak on campus. Chisholm, Lee recalled, "convinced me that if I really wanted to make a significant impact, that I should get involved in politics."<sup>4</sup> After graduating with a B.A. in psychology in 1973, she earned an M.S.W. from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1975. Lee then joined the staff of Oakland Representative Ron Dellums, working in his office for 11 years, starting as an intern and eventually becoming his chief of staff. In 1990, Lee won election to the California assembly and then served in the state senate from 1997 to 1998.

When Congressman Dellums, a 14-term veteran, announced his retirement in late 1997, Lee emerged as his successor.<sup>5</sup> Politically, she followed in Dellums's footsteps, advocating military spending cuts in favor of economic opportunity and job training programs, more funding for education, and support for environmental protection.<sup>6</sup> Her California senate district covered much of the congressional district, so she enjoyed wide name recognition. In the April 8 special election, Lee prevailed with 67 percent of the vote.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent re-election campaigns she won lopsided majorities, capturing 80 percent of the vote or more.<sup>8</sup>

When Lee claimed her seat in the 105th Congress (1997–1999) on April 20, 1998, she received assignments on the Banking and Financial Services Committee (later renamed Financial Services) and the Science Committee. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), she resigned the Science assignment and, in the 107th (2001–2003), secured a seat on the International Relations Committee, where she serves on the Subcommittee on Africa. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), she served as Whip for the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), as co-chair of the liberal Progressive Caucus, and as a senior Democratic Whip.

In the House, Representative Lee emerged as an advocate for the country's working poor and underprivileged. On her first day in Congress, Lee delivered a floor speech calling for improvements to the education system, universal health care, safeguards for Social Security, stronger environmental protection measures, and the importance of reproductive choice.<sup>9</sup> As a member of the Financial Services Committee, Lee sought to prohibit insurance companies from refusing to do business in geographic areas they deemed risky. Lee also criticized lenders for targeting poor Americans who often borrowed cash and then fell into a cycle of revolving debt.<sup>10</sup>

Lee also focused on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has afflicted the Bay Area and devastated sub-Saharan Africa. Lee secured \$5 million to fund HIV/AIDS clinics in Alameda County. She co-authored the Global AIDS and Tuberculosis Relief Act of 2000, signed into law by President William J. Clinton, and the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003, and the Assistance for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children in Developing Countries Act of 2005, both signed into law by President George W. Bush. In 2006, as chair of the CBC Global AIDS Task Force, Congresswoman Lee introduced legislation to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection in developing countries.<sup>11</sup>

Representative Lee has worked hard to balance the priorities of peace and security in U.S. foreign policy. In 1999, she opposed U.S. air strikes in Yugoslavia. Following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, she was the lone dissenting vote against a resolution authorizing broad authority to President Bush to use force in response. Lee cited a need for thoughtful consideration before taking military action.<sup>12</sup> She later offered an alternative amendment to the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq and introduced a resolution to repeal the doctrine of preemption.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Barbara Lee," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 156–157.
- 2 "Barbara Lee," 21 March 1994, *California Journal Weekly*.
- 3 Rick Del Vecchio, "Lee Wins Dellums' Congressional Seat," 8 April 1998, *San Francisco Chronicle*: A3.
- 4 "Barbara Lee."
- 5 Norah O'Donnell, "Dellums Redux Progressive Legacy Continues in the 9th," 6 April 1998, *Roll Call*; Venise Wagner, "Dellums Passes Torch to Long-Time Supporter; State Sen. Lee gets ringing endorsement; 27-Year Lawmaker's Departure May Bring Free-For-All to East Bay Politics," 11 December 1997, *San Francisco Examiner*: A9.
- 6 Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women*: 156–157.
- 7 "Dellums' Ex-Aide Wins House Seat," 8 April 1998, Associated Press.
- 8 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.
- 9 "Official Biography of Barbara Lee," <http://www.house.gov/lee/Biography.html> (accessed 11 February 2003); *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 April 1998): 2074.
- 10 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 83–84.
- 11 "Barbara Lee," *Contemporary Black Biography*, Vol. 25 (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 2000); *Politics in America*, 2002: 83.
- 12 Peter Carlson, "The Solitary Vote of Barbara Lee; Congresswoman Against Use of Force," 19 September 2001, *Washington Post*: C1.